

The Hearts of Israel Have Gone After Absalom
2 Samuel 14:21-15:17
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Introduction

This past week, the second Republican Presidential Candidates Debate happened. Please don't get nervous if you hate politics at church or excited if you wish we did more: I didn't watch because I didn't even realize that it was on. I saw some of the descriptions afterwards, and it sounds like every other TV primary debate: every candidate trying to distinguish himself or herself from one another, so criticizing the current administration and the other party hard while lightly taking fellow Republicans to task. We have over a year to go before the election, so we're going to see tons of campaigning, attack ads, more debates, all of the speeches, the mudslinging, the nasty social media posts... lucky us, huh? If that's your thing, enjoy it while the rest of us endure it. I'm pretty cynical, I'm pretty sure that most politicians hire consultants and just ask them, "What do I need to say to get elected? How can I tell them what they want to hear?" I know that there are some politicians who live by their convictions, but that seems to be the exception to the rule.

And so politicians make big promises hoping to excite either their voter base or the general population. There have been some notable promises kept (one from each party): President Kennedy said that before the decade was out, we would land a man on the moon. Donald Trump's promise to appoint Supreme Court justices who would overturn Roe vs Wade. To take one broken promise from each party: George H.W. Bush's "read my lips: no new taxes" and Barack Obama's "if you like your health care plan, you can keep it" have both widely been seen to have broken those promises.

I said all of that clearly not because I'm excited about politics, but because we have a Scripture passage this morning where someone is essentially running for office. There won't be an election, but this man wants to take the throne away from the current king of the land and sit on it himself. The reader is not told exactly why this man, Absalom, is coming after the king, his father David's throne, but it seems that some combination of impatience, anger, or the feeling that he will be denied the throne after his father's death moved him to action. As we work through the passage, we'll see Absalom work the people like a skilled politician, campaigning and telling them what they want to hear. It will lead to an insurrection not an election, as chaos descends upon Israel.

Since we've had guest preachers for the last couple weeks, let's recap where we've been in the life of King David. David's big scandal in 2 Samuel 11 was taking a married woman into his bed and then trying to cover up her pregnancy. When that failed, he had her husband killed in battle and then married her. But God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David, and though David confessed and repented, God ended the life of the child they had conceived and said that David's house would be troubled for the rest of his life. That became very clear when one of his sons, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar. Though David was angry about it, he did nothing, so another son, Absalom, killed Amnon and fled. We come to chapter 14 with Absalom having lived in exile for three years. David had not pursued him to either punish him and bring him to justice, or to reconcile with him.

In the first twenty verses that we are going to skip in this chapter, Joab (David's military commander) decided to intervene and get Absalom back home. So he hired a woman to go to David pretending to be a widow whose one son has killed her other son in an argument. The people

around her demanded vengeance, though she hinted that their real motive was to steal her family's inheritance. David offered protection to both her and her son. At that, the woman revealed that she was actually talking about David and Absalom, and that David was acting poorly in keeping his son from returning to Jerusalem. David realized that Joab had put her up to this, but rather than be angry, he decided to allow for Absalom's return.

I. Return of the Handsome Prince (14:21-33)

21 Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I grant this; go, bring back the young man Absalom." 22 And Joab fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king. And Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, my lord the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant." 23 So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. 24 And the king said, "Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence. 25 Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. 26 And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. 27 There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar. She was a beautiful woman. 28 So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, without coming into the king's presence. 29 Then Absalom sent for Joab, to send him to the king, but Joab would not come to him. And he sent a second time, but Joab would not come. 30 Then he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. 31 Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" 32 Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent word to you, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king, to ask, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." Now therefore let me go into the presence of the king, and if there is guilt in me, let him put me to death.'" 33 Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.

So, with a little help from Joab, Absalom was allowed to return from exile. But David didn't exactly roll out the red carpet; instead, he ignored his estranged son when he returned: *"Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence."* Understandably, he was still angry about Amnon's murder, but he kept Absalom in a holding pattern: he would not put him to death, but he also would not restore him. David preferred him "out of sight, out of mind." But Absalom would not be ignored.

The description of Absalom in verses 25-27 says nothing of his character, only that he was good-looking, had great hair, and had four children, his one daughter named after his sister, Tamar. As we reflect on this description, we're perhaps reminded of the word of Samuel the prophet at the beginning of David's reign: *"Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."* Verse 25 says that Absalom was the best-looking person in Jerusalem, no one was praised more than he was for their looks. Not a blemish on him from head to foot, so he must have been physically fit and all-around attractive. The implication is that he was popular, all Israel loved him and would be happy to follow him. The other implication is that he knows how handsome he is and is quite taken with himself – who weighs their own hair? File away the comments about his hair being plentiful; that's a bit of foreshadowing that will come back at the end of his life.

Even though Joab had helped Absalom return to Jerusalem, the prince got very tired of being excluded from the palace. Two years of silence went by, so he tried to get Joab to meet with him twice to be his go-between with his father again. When the commander ignored him, Absalom

knew what would get his attention: burn down his field! And amazingly, it works. That anecdote tells you everything you need to know about Absalom. First of all, that he resorted to violence when he was ignored, whether it's his ally, his brother, or his father. But also that he was so convinced that he deserved more that he would hurt even the people who had helped him in the past. He owed Joab a debt of gratitude for smoothing out his return home, but instead he lashes out at him when he wants more.

So adding up the time, we're at five years since Absalom had killed his brother, so he sent an ultimatum to David through Joab: Receive me or execute me! Everything seems to come together nicely in verse 33, as David let his son back into his presence and kissed him. All seemed forgiven, and peace would reign from here on out, right? Not so much, as we'll see in the next ten verses:

II. The Conspiracy of the Scheming Prince (15:1-10)

¹ After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. ² And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, "From what city are you?" And when he said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel," ³ Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." ⁴ Then Absalom would say, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice." ⁵ And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. ⁶ Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. ⁷ And at the end of four years Absalom said to the king, "Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the Lord, in Hebron. ⁸ For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, 'If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the Lord.'" ⁹ The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron. ¹⁰ But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, 'Absalom is king at Hebron!'"

So the first thing we hear after David received Absalom in person is that Absalom started riding around Jerusalem with a horse and chariot with fifty men running before him. Kind of hard to interpret that any other way than flaunting his return and a not-so-subtle challenge to David's kingship, a tipping of his hand that he wanted to usurp his father's position. This scene should make us think back to when Samuel had warned the people of Israel many years previously about the dangers of having a king "like all the nations," emphasizing that such a king would have chariots and horsemen to run them (1 Samuel 8:5, 11).¹

Absalom would stand at the city gates, which is where complaints or disputes could be brought. He would intercept whoever was going to bring their case to the palace and convince them that they would not get justice from the current king; but hmm, what if there was a new king in place? He used the techniques that politicians still use today: telling the people that he heard them, that he felt their pain, and promised that even though the current administration ignored them, they would get attention and justice if he was in charge. He even embraced them and kissed them, which I assume was culturally appropriate. So verse 6 says that Absalom "*stole the hearts of the men of Israel*" over the course of four years. Which sounds like he won them over to his cause, stealing them from allegiance to David. But it can also be understood as "duping the men of Israel." The same phrase was used when Jacob stole his father-in-law Laban's heart in Genesis 31, and it clearly refers there to deceiving him.² Absalom has sown the seeds of discontent and rebellion among the people.

¹ John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 379.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (England: Christian Focus, 2013), p. 189.

Then in verse 7, Absalom used religion as a cloak for his ambition and treason, getting permission from the king to worship at Hebron, though his true plan was to use it as a secret coronation. Now, where have we heard Hebron before? Oh yeah, that's where David had been crowned king back in chapter 5. Ironically, David told his son, "Go in peace," (v. 9) when Absalom had no intention of peace. He was gearing up for war, for overthrowing his father, whom he seemingly felt was a tired, ineffective, pathetic excuse for a king. This was the ideal moment in Absalom's mind to set the mutiny, the revolution in motion. So he planted people throughout Israel ready to declare him king. His father, the great warrior, was probably ready to defend his kingdom against any outside threats. But danger from inside his own family he most likely hadn't even considered or prepared for. So in the next seven verses we see

III. The Flight of the Threatened King (15:11-17)

11 With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests, and they went in their innocence and knew nothing. 12 And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his city Giloh. And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing. 13 And a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom." 14 Then David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise, and let us flee, or else there will be no escape for us from Absalom. Go quickly, lest he overtake us quickly and bring down ruin on us and strike the city with the edge of the sword." 15 And the king's servants said to the king, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides." 16 So the king went out, and all his household after him. And the king left ten concubines to keep the house. 17 And the king went out, and all the people after him. And they halted at the last house.

Absalom had ingeniously plotted this takeover in secret for four years. He had allies who were in on the plot as well as two hundred men in verse 11 who knew nothing, but were used as pawns anyways. The crown jewel of Absalom's new administration was going to be David's wise counselor, Ahithophel, whom the prince had sent for, and had joined his cause. So word finally came back to David that his son had rallied the people against him. And it doesn't sound like David needed a lot of time to consider whether Absalom's popularity put his own life in danger - he sent word to his household to get ready to flee. David, the great warrior, would rather leave town than fight his son's army that he was apparently convinced would destroy the city. Absalom had not threatened David's life or to destroy the city, but clearly David knew his son well enough to know what he was capable of. So it's back to the time of David being a fugitive, a reminder of the days when Saul hunted him down. Who is going to win and sit on the throne? Does David have the fortitude to attack his son back? Why did David leave ten concubines, and why did the author even include that? Come back next week to find out.

Conclusion

As we think about the bigger themes in this passage, two questions: 1) Did anybody here have perfect parents? Nope, none of us did. 2) Are any of the parents here perfect parents? Nope. One of the major themes of this time in David's life is the rebellion of a child against his parent. Now, none of us are quite in the position of Prince Absalom raising up an army and turning a country against his father. But the impulse to lash out and rebel against your parents is a very relatable one.

You might have some real baggage from your past and a list of things that your parents did that hurt you. Some parents live their lives through their children and manipulate them; not meaning to hurt them but doing real damage in the process. A child actor named Jeannette McCurdy recently wrote a book called *I'm Glad My Mom Died* that talks about her mom basically forcing her into acting. Jeannette had a big role on the show *iCarly*, but behind the scenes she was developing an eating

disorder and destructive habits as her mom controlled her diet and forced her to be the successful actress that she never was. She wanted to please her mom, but eventually her life blew up and she carried a lot of bitterness towards her. Maybe you can relate. Other parents are so selfish that they abuse their kids, verbally, emotionally, or physically. Maybe they were abused themselves, so they prove the old saying, "Hurt people hurt people." You might need a Christian counselor to help you process and heal from some of the wounds from your childhood. Kath and I were sitting with some old friends recently, and they talked about how a few of their parents had really hurt them. They told stories both from childhood and from adulthood, after they had moved out and had kids of their own. They tried to have relationships with those parents, but they had to set rules and boundaries so that they wouldn't keep getting hurt by their parents. People can carry profound wounds from their parents.

The fifth commandment tells us to honor your father and mother. You know what the rest of that commandment says? "*That your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*" God gave His people parents to love them and direct them, and it was to their benefit to follow them. And that command has not gone away. But sometimes parents are like David and neglect you. Maybe they're uneven in their treatment of their kids or unnecessarily harsh or distant. How do you honor parents who you don't trust and who you haven't forgiven? If your parents hurt you, you have a few options: 1) you can pretend everything's OK and bear the anger in secret, but it won't go away, you will carry that with you; 2) you can emotionally and physically distance yourself from them, just cutting them off; or 3) you can work through your issues with them and forgive them. Easier said than done, I know. We need the Lord's wisdom and healing, we need counselors and friends for support. But that's ultimately what Absalom should have done, that's what we're always called to work towards. Reconciliation if we can, a relationship with clear, defined boundaries if we must, but forgiveness no matter what. Even if a parent doesn't see their side in things, no one owns the ways they sinned against you. My grandfather died about a decade ago and never really acknowledged the hurtful things that he did and said to my dad, but my dad said that he eventually had to forgive him so that it wouldn't eat him up inside too. A believer can love because God first loved us. We forgive because God first forgave us.

Absalom is a reminder that inside all of us runs a streak of rebellion that wants to burn everything down and take the throne for ourselves. He is the picture of our alienation and anger towards God the Father, looking to dethrone Him so we can be in charge of our own lives. We think we know better than God how He should run the universe. We can't understand why He would allow bad things to happen to people we love, and we don't think it's fair that He holds us accountable for our sins. Until we realize that our perspective is so unbelievably limited by our humanity, because we are finite beings. We have no idea how God is working behind the scenes, the hidden purposes of His will. Until we come to see that He is a God of both holiness and love, and that He is working all things out to the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose, then our rebellion and anger melts away. We can cry out like the Psalmist, "Why, Lord?" and "How long, O Lord?" But ultimately, we must trust His Father's heart.

David was the opposite of the father of the prodigal son. In Jesus' parable in Luke 15, the father, whose son had insulted him and squandered his part of the family fortune, did not stand aloof when his son returned. No, while the son was still a long way off, the father spotted him, felt compassion and "ran and embraced him and kissed him." He refused to allow the son to sulk back home and just take up a position of servant; he celebrated him and restored him to his position as son. And, of course, the father in the prodigal son parable is God Himself. "David stands in stark contrast to the

king we need and the King we have by God's grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ."³ The greater David, Jesus, stands in contrast to Absalom as well. Rather than suspicion, anger, and rebellion directed at His Father, He had nothing but love and obedience to the will of His Father. Though God the Father sent His Son to earth to die a painful death on our behalf, Jesus the Son accepted that cup of suffering and died as a substitute for us. His death bore the wrath of God that our sins deserve, He bought our redemption and eternal life.

→ Communion

Benediction

Romans 16:25-27: "Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen."

³ S.A. Fix & J. Robert Vannoy, *2 Samuel: A Commentary*, found at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/2-samuel>.